

# Department of Human Services

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Happy Holidays!

\*Important story at this spot

## Articles in Today's Clips Friday, December 21, 2007

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<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Child Abuse/Neglect/Protection	2-7
Foster Care	8-9
Adoption	10
Domestic Violence	11
Health Care	12
Food Assistance	13
Energy Assistance	14
Homelessness	15-16
Charities	17-24
DHS Employees	25-26
State Employees	27-30
Triangle Project	31-32

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[Back](#)

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Article published Dec 21, 2007  
Family knew of toddler's abuse  
Gonzales' sister speaks to couple about child's fate

By BOBBY AMPEZZAN and CRAIG DAVISON  
Times Herald

A family member of Braylon Bishop Gonzales said she spoke on the phone with the toddler's mother Wednesday and that the mother, Ashley Marie Snowden, 23, gave conflicting accounts of the child's death.

John William Gonzales, who lives with Snowden and is Braylon's father, was arrested Tuesday on charges related to a standoff with police and has not been charged in relation to Braylon's death.

Officials believe Braylon, who was 18 months old, may have died before the family left Michigan. Police, acting on a tip, found his body in a plastic bag Tuesday in a Fort Wayne home where his parents live.

Marlo Harley, the sister of Gonzales and Braylon's aunt, said Snowden told her during the conversation - which Harley recorded - differing scenarios, one in which Snowden was at work when Braylon died and another in which she was at home, but in another room. Snowden elaborated on the second scenario by saying when Gonzales came back into the room, Braylon was gasping for air. Snowden said she performed CPR, but died about half an hour later,

Harley said.

Harley also said she had a phone conversation on Tuesday with her brother, where he told her the police were outside his house and they were going to kick the door in.

"He said, 'Whatever you hear on TV, don't believe it. I'll explain it in a letter when I go to jail,'" Harley of Fort Wayne said. "He said he's going to take all the blame for everything."

On Thursday, an Indiana coroner ruled that Braylon was killed by blunt force trauma powerful enough to fracture his skull. Police believe Braylon's body may have at one time been encased in concrete.

Snowden's sister said St. Clair County Child Protective Services was investigating the toddler's family when they fled to Fort Wayne, Ind., in July 2005.

Port Huron police have taken over the death investigation.

"This is not an easy one," said Capt. Don Porrett. "It's not cut and dried, (and) there's a whole bunch of work."

Harley said Snowden said that after the blunt force trauma, they waited a half hour until Braylon died, then bought him a tuxedo and slept in the same bed with him that night. Later, he was wrapped in plastic and put in a trunk under the TV in the living room, she said. They also considered burying Braylon in a campground and one other place Harley said she doesn't remember before purchasing concrete together and encasing Braylon in it.

Danielle Snowden, 21, Braylon's aunt who now lives in Las Vegas, lived with her sister and Gonzales at 618 White St. for a few months in late 2004 and early 2005. She said on one occasion she saw a case worker from child protective services strip Braylon and examine his body for bruises.

Maureen Sorbet, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services which oversees individual county

child protective services departments, would not confirm or deny that Braylon had been the subject of an investigation.

"I can tell you that in situations like this, we would be cooperating with law enforcement," she said.

Harley said she and other members of Gonzales' side of the family have seen both parents act violently to their children and have contacted child protective services multiple times.

Danielle Snowden said she didn't witness Gonzales acting violently with her sister or any children but was aware Gonzales was abusive. Danielle said she and other family members didn't suspect Braylon was missing because Gonzales restricted Ashley's contact with her relatives.

Danielle believes the move to Indiana in 2005 was precipitated by Braylon's death.

Harley said that in addition to Braylon, the couple had two other children together, a girl and a boy named Bishop Braylon Gonzales.

Once Braylon's family moved, Danielle said she never was given a mailing address for the family, only post office box numbers. She also said her family tried to contact police, "but you can only do so much."

Danielle Snowden said she stayed in touch with her sister through phone calls, and Ashley Snowden had visited family in Port Huron since leaving the state.

During those visits, it was understood that Braylon had been left in Indiana with his father, although Snowden often brought her 2-year-old daughter on the trips.

"If you're not a person that's dealt with a battered woman, you don't know," Danielle Snowden said. "He has her, like, brainwashed."

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# ClickOnDetroit.com

## Child's Remains Found Inside Home

POSTED: 7:30 pm EST December 19, 2007  
 UPDATED: 8:18 pm EST December 20, 2007

**FORT WAYNE, Ind.** -- A Port Huron man may be facing murder charges after police said he killed his 18-month-old child and tried to hide the remains.

Police discovered the body of a child as they were searching the home of a man arrested on separate charges.

Fort Wayne, Ind. police went to the Fort Wayne home of 38-year-old John W. Gonzales on Tuesday after receiving a tip that a child's body might be there.

When officers arrived, Gonzales had barricaded himself in a room with one of his children, said police spokesman Roy Sutphin.

Gonzales surrendered shortly after police arrived, and the child was taken into protective custody.

After getting a search warrant for the home, police found the body of a young child wrapped in a plastic bag inside a storage container.

The coroner said they believe the baby died in 2005 from a blunt force trauma to the head.

Police said they believe the body may have been encased in concrete at one time, Sutphin said.

Police went back to Port Huron, where the couple lived, to look for clues.

Jimmy Stacks, the current tenant, told Local 4 police came into his home searching for evidence. "It was like a homemade wall. If you knock on it, it broke apart. It had cement bags down there still," said Stacks.

A port Huron neighbor says he remembers the couple's volatile relationship.

"I heard a lot of screaming and fighting between them two -- and the baby screaming -- I can hear it plain as day," said Gonzales' former neighbor David Neely.

Police from both Port Huron and Fort Wayne are investigating.

"We're hoping to be able to talk to relatives and neighbors and make some determination to narrow it to the last house they lived in - and we have to remember it was two years ago," said Port Huron police Capt. Donald Porrett.

Gonzales has a lengthy criminal history, according to police. In the '90s he served jail time for drunken driving, disorderly conduct and having sex with a minor.

Just two weeks ago, he was accused of battery and child neglect involving his other two young children. Prosecutors will file the child abuse charges in addition to criminal recklessness and resisting arrest.

According to prosecutors, Gonzales will likely be charged with murder, once investigators figure out where the crime occurred.

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### RELATED TO STORY



**Video: Local Man May Face Murder Charges After Baby Bones Found In Home**

## RIVER ROUGE

### Man gave tot a joint, police say

He's charged with child abuse

December 21, 2007

BY BEN SCHMITT

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

An 18-year-old River Rouge man is charged with second-degree child abuse for allegedly helping a 3-year-old boy smoke a marijuana-type cigarette and videotaping the incident.

"Just when you think you've seen all kinds of child abuse, this comes along," Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said in a statement Thursday. "The evidence shows that the defendant thought it was cute to have a 3-year-old baby smoking a marijuana cigar or blunt."

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The defendant is Felipe Francisco Garcia, who was babysitting the child. It's unclear whether the cigarette contained marijuana because the substance has not been retrieved, River Rouge police said.

Police uncovered the video during a separate, undisclosed investigation involving Garcia about two weeks ago.

Investigators say they plan to test the boy for marijuana in his system, explaining the drug can linger in someone's system for up to 30 days.

Garcia is a friend of the child's mother, police said. The child continues to live with his mother.

Garcia was arraigned Thursday in 26-1st District Court in River Rouge on the child abuse charge, which is punishable by up to four years in prison. He was ordered held on a \$10,000 bond.

A preliminary hearing is scheduled for Dec. 28.

Contact **BEN SCHMITT** at 313-223-4296 or [bcschmitt@freepress.com](mailto:bcschmitt@freepress.com).

#### Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071221/NEWS02/712210302/1001>

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Friday, December 21, 2007

## River Rouge

# Police: Toddler given pot 18-year-old man charged with providing, encouraging a 3-year-old boy to smoke a 'blunt' while babysitting.

Christine Ferretti / The Detroit News

**RIVER ROUGE** -- An 18-year-old River Rouge man could face prison time after police say he encouraged a toddler to smoke a marijuana "blunt."

Felipe Francisco Garcia was arraigned Thursday in River Rouge's 26th District Court by Judge Raymond A. Charron on a felony charge of second-degree child abuse and a misdemeanor offense of furnishing to minors for supplying a 3-year-old boy with drugs, River Rouge police said.

Police said in early December while Garcia was babysitting the boy, he handed him an object that resembled a marijuana cigarette and urged the child to smoke it. The act was recorded on a digital camera. "Just when you think you've seen all kinds of child abuse, this comes along. This is why parents must be ever vigilant about their child care arrangements," Wayne County Prosecutor Kym L. Worthy said in a press release. "The evidence shows that the defendant thought it was cute to have a 3-year-old baby smoking a marijuana cigar or 'blunt'."

Police say Garcia, a friend of the child's mother, has disputed the charge, claiming that he gave the child a Black & Mild cigar, not drugs.

Police uncovered the video during a separate investigation two weeks after the alleged incident and were unable to confiscate the cigarette at that time, Maria Miller, a spokeswoman for Worthy confirmed.

Garcia was arrested Tuesday and faces up to four years in prison and a \$50 fine.

Bond was set at \$10,000 and 10 percent must be posted for Garcia's release.

A preliminary hearing is set for Dec. 28.

*You can reach Christine Ferretti at (734) 462-2289 or [cferretti@detnews.com](mailto:cferretti@detnews.com).*

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## Man accosts student

Friday, December 21, 2007

HOLLAND -- Police say an 11-year-old boy was approached about 8 a.m. Thursday and offered a ride to school by a stranger, a move that raised concerns that the person may have had criminal intentions. The man never left his vehicle and drove off when the child declined the ride in the area of 22nd Street and Maple Avenue, Capt. Rick Walters said. Police reminded parents to talk to their children about potential dangers and to have them report all suspicious activity.

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## Study says foster care benefits brains

**AP** Associated Press

By LAURAN NEERGAARD, AP Medical Writer

Thu Dec 20, 6:20 PM ET

Toddlers rescued from orphanages and placed in good foster homes score dramatically higher on IQ tests years later than children who were left behind, concludes a one-of-a-kind project in Romania that has profound implications for child welfare around the globe.

The boost meant the difference between borderline retardation and average intelligence for some youngsters.

Most important, children removed from orphanages before age 2 had the biggest improvement — key new evidence of a sensitive period for brain development, according to the U.S. team that conducted the research.

"What we're really talking about is the importance of getting kids out of bad environments and put into good environments," said Dr. Charles Nelson III of Harvard Medical School, who led the study being published Friday in the journal *Science*.

The younger that happens, "the less likely the child is to have major problems," he added.

The research is credited with influencing child-care changes in Romania, and UNICEF has begun using the data to push numerous countries that still depend on state-run orphanages to start shifting to foster care-like systems.

"The research provides concrete scientific evidence on the long-term impacts of the deprivation of quality care for children," UNICEF child protection specialist Aaron Greenberg said. "The interesting part about this is the one-on-one caring of a young child impacts ... cognitive and intellectual development."

That orphanages are not optimal for child development comes as no surprise. Earlier studies have found that thousands of children adopted during the 1990s from squalid orphanages in Eastern Europe, China and elsewhere continued to face serious developmental problems even after moving to affluent new homes with doting parents.

But questions remain. Were those abandoned or orphaned children who spent more time in orphanages less healthy to begin with? How much damage does neglect and lack of stimulation in the early months of life do? How long does that damage last?

In the study, U.S. researchers randomly assigned 136 young children in Bucharest's six orphanages to either keep living there or live with foster parents who were specially trained and paid for by the study. Romania had no foster-care system in 2000 when the research began.

The team chose apparently healthy children. Researchers repeatedly tested brain development as those children grew, and tracked those who ultimately were adopted or reunited with family. For comparison, they also tested the cognitive ability of children who never were institutionalized.

By 4 1/2, youngsters in foster care were scoring almost 10 points higher on IQ tests than the children left in orphanages. Children who left the orphanages before 2 saw an almost 15-point increase.

Nelson compared the ages at which children were sent to foster care. For every extra month spent in the orphanage, up to almost age 3, it meant roughly a half-point lower score on those later IQ tests.

Children raised in their biological homes still fared best, with average test scores 10 points to 20 points higher than the foster-care kids.

What does that mean as these children grow up? Just this week an anxious acquaintance cornered Nelson to ask what to expect of a child who spent nine months in a Vietnamese orphanage.

"There's much more to functioning in life than your IQ," Nelson stresses.

Plus, he only now has begun testing these children again as they turn 7 and 8. They might catch up.



For now, Nelson tells adoptive parents, "The older the child is when they leave the institution, the more likely that child may have some developmental problems and the more difficult it may be to ameliorate those problems. ... The message to parents is simply to go into this with their eyes open, but not to give up."

For the U.S. and other countries that depend on foster care instead of orphanages, the study has implications, too, because it used high-quality foster care that is not the norm in many places, Nelson noted. Studies comparing the impact of foster care of varying quality are under way.

The Romanian government requested the study and began its own foster care program shortly thereafter. Early study results are credited with influencing Romania's recent prohibition on institutionalizing children under 2 unless they are severely disabled.

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On the Net:

Science: <http://www.sciencemag.org>

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# ClickOnDetroit.com

## Lowe's Co-Workers Learn They Are Related

POSTED: 6:03 pm EST December 20, 2007

UPDATED: 7:55 pm EST December 20, 2007

A one-of-a-kind reunion has given new meaning to "home improvement" at a Lowe's store.

A male worker at a Lowe's in Grand Rapids has just learned his birth mother works there, too.

Steve Flaig is a delivery driver who was put up for adoption as an infant.

His birth mother, Christine Tallady, is the Lowe's store's head cashier.

The two have worked in the same store for the past eight months but until now never knew they were related.

Flaig said he started searching for his birth mother when he turned 18.

Today, at age 22, he was stunned to learn his mother was a co-worker, and he actually waited a couple of days before telling Tallady.

"It's a bizarre situation, and I wasn't 100 percent sure on what to do about it," Flaig explained. "How to bring it to her attention and how to break the news to her, because there was always that fear that it could potentially go wrong."

Flaig said after verifying Tallady was his mother, he asked the adoption agency to call her and break the news.

It turns out Tallady had left the adoption "open," which means Flaig could get information about her, if he wanted.

With the help of the agency, the two planned to meet outside of work at a Grand Rapids area restaurant.

"I went to the restaurant two days later," recalled Tallady. "I walked in and he got out of his seat, and we just hugged and hugged and cried and cried," said Tallady, who added she always hoped her son would find her one day.

"It was like something was missing," Flaig said about the desire to find his birth mother. "You pursue that thinking -- 'This person is out there somewhere, and I would love to meet them someday.' "

Tallady has two other children and said they were "excited to learn of their older brother."

The mother-son reunion has gotten national attention, and on Thursday Flaig and Tallady appeared on the "Today" show, seen locally on Local 4.

### RELATED TO STORY



**Video: Lowe's Co-Workers Learn They Are Related**

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Detroit Free Press

Oakland County news briefs

*December 21, 2007*

## **PONTIAC: Prison delayed for convicted killer**

A Detroit man who was convicted last month of shooting his ex-girlfriend, and setting their newborn daughter on fire, burning her to death, will wait until January before going to prison.

Jimmie Reed Jr., 31, was to be sentenced to life in prison earlier this month after a circuit court judge found him guilty of two counts of first-degree murder in the July 2006 deaths of Markeda Byas, 31, and Arctavia Reed, 2 months. Reed killed them, Prosecutor Barbara Morrison argued at trial, because he didn't want to pay child support. Reed had a 7-year-old daughter with another woman, and a girlfriend who was 9 months pregnant at the time he killed Byas and the baby.

Oakland County Circuit Judge Fred Mester was to sentence Reed on Dec. 12, but that sentencing has been delayed until Jan. 9.

Mester is on family leave, following the automobile death of his oldest daughter in November. Reed remains in the Oakland County jail.



## THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

### Whitmore Lake Health Clinic fights to stay afloat as financial woes continue

Medical facility vital to area's uninsured

Friday, December 21, 2007

BY LISA CAROLIN

The Livingston Community News

As the number of uninsured and underinsured patients continues to increase, the Whitmore Lake Health Clinic continues its struggle to stay in business.

"Just because you have financial problems doesn't mean you close," Executive Director Hilda Weiser Ely says about the nonprofit clinic on M-36 just west of US-23.

"We have a group of University of Michigan first-year medical students who have been doing fundraisers for us," including a recent fashion show, she said. "We have a lot of good volunteers pulling together, and someone recently donated a year's worth of paper to us."

Ely says the clinic has 1,671 patients, 51 percent who are uninsured or underinsured, a number that has increased from last year. The clinic accepts all kinds of insurance, has 385 patients on the Livingston Health Plan, and more than 90 patients on the Washtenaw Health Plan, along with 103 uninsured patients.

The Livingston and Washtenaw Health Plans are for people who do not have traditional health insurance. The plans cost patients nothing, and provide limited coverage.

"Many of our patients have lost their jobs and their health insurance," says Ely. "We have patients who are working three part-time jobs but have no health insurance. Our staff is committed, and we believe in what we're doing. You're treated the same here whether or not you have insurance."

The Whitmore Lake Health Clinic, which opened in 1971, has a six-person staff that includes two physicians, two medical assistants, one billing clerk, and a director. Ely says the clinic needs to raise \$100,000-\$150,000 a year to stay in business, with most of its money going to pay salaries, taxes, workers' compensation, malpractice insurance, building overhead, and office and medical supplies.

Lisa Carolin can be reached at [lc Carolin@livingstoncommunitynews.com](mailto:lc Carolin@livingstoncommunitynews.com) or at 810-844-2010.

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# Food pantry holiday bags go to needy

Leelanau Enterprise

December 21, 2007

Barb and Arnold Zeits worked for two days at the Northport Food Pantry preparing 168 bags that were distributed Monday.



ARNOLD ZEITS fills a holiday bag with food items at the Northport Food Pantry Monday.

Eighty-four were the “regular” bags, distributed each Monday of the month. The other half were holiday bags that included oatmeal, biscuit mix, cake mix, frosting, pudding, juice, canned yams, a 6-pound Sara Lee ham, sweet potatoes, potatoes and cranberry sauce.

In addition, homemade rolls and candy are also going in the bags. They were donated, along with the yams, by Donna Brown of the Treasure Chest. Seventy-five pounds of fresh sweet potatoes and 200 pounds of regular spuds were donated by Tom Korson of Gills Pier.

The pantry, located at St. Gertrude’s Church in Northport, will be closed both Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve. However, the Zeits’ and Auggie the “greeter dog,” who welcomes pantry recipients at the door, will have special hours on Dec. 26 and Jan. 2, from 4 to 8 p.m.

# **Holiday fund aids seniors with energy cost**

Leelanau Enterprise

December 21, 2007

The Grand Traverse Regional Foundation has established a 2007 holiday fund to assist area senior citizens with energy costs.

With state aid discontinued, the need for assistance is expected to be greater than in previous years. In coordination with the Area Agency on Aging and county Commission on Aging, the community foundation is collecting money to help support emergency energy assistance for seniors in the Grand Traverse region.

All funds raised through the end of the year will be split equally between Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau counties. In the first few weeks of the initiative, \$34,000 has been secured but supporters say more help is needed. If a minimum of \$50,000 is raised by year's end, each county Commission on Aging can help 15 to 20 households within their county.

Donations sent by mail must be postmarked by Saturday, Dec. 22. Online donations can be made through Monday, Dec. 31

More information is available at 935-4066.

Donations may be sent to 2007 Holiday Fund for Senior Citizen Energy Assistance, GTCF, 250 E. Front St., Ste. 310, Traverse City, MI 49684. Donations can also be made online at [www.good4ever.org](http://www.good4ever.org); click on "donate online."

# Durand teacher leads effort to donate blankets to the homeless



Argus-Press Photo by Anthony Cepak Krista Bloomfield, left, Amira Rawlston, center, and Zach Merrill, sophomores at Durand High School, work on a quilt in the Durand High School library Wednesday afternoon. The students were working on a quilt to donate to the needy.

By SCOTT ATKINSON Argus-Press Staff Writer  
*Thursday, December 20, 2007 10:11 AM EST*

DURAND - Durand High School English teacher Marci Long isn't handing out homework before Christmas break, but her students still have work to do.

Long and her students are instead spending their class periods making blankets for the homeless. Long started donating blankets with her students last year, when she said she had businesses and corporations donate the money.

This year her students, about 110 in all, collectively donated about \$600 that Long used to buy sheets of fleece to make the blankets. Long said she thought, "if the kids donated the money they might appreciate it even more."

Sitting in the cafeteria, the students learned how to attach two sheets of fleece together to make a blanket - a craft Long learned from her mother.

Brooke Hitchings was in Long's class last year making blankets - as well as

this year - and said she enjoys doing something for charity.

“I remember (Long) told a story about how there was a mother and like three children living in their car and they each got their own blanket and they were so thankful for it...they thought that would never happen,” she said.

Hitchings also helped with the Locks of Love program on Tuesday, during which people donate their hair to make wigs for children with cancer. Long organized the Locks of Love event at the school.

“It's fun, it's something else to do besides work,” said Shannon O'Hara, a sophomore.

When another student expressed his confusion as to why they didn't just buy blankets rather than make them, O'Hara responded, “Because you're putting your heart into this.”

Some students took the scraps of fleece and used them to make scarves.

Long said she has several of the blankets her mother has made at home.

“They're warm,” she said.

She plans to donate the blankets to St. Mary's Catholic Church in Durand.  
Last year she donated them to St. Luke's Ministry in Flint.

“It doesn't really matter where they go if there's a need,” she said, but is looking forward to donating to Durand this year to help her own community where she says, “There's a need.”

Long said she plans to continue donating blankets in years to come.





**ourMidland.com**  
from the Midland Daily News

12/20/2007

## Salvation Army provides holiday options for the less fortunate

By [Angela E. Lackey](#)

Surrounded by tables filled with games, dolls and about any other toy imaginable, Amy carefully picked out a Winnie the Pooh ceramic bank for her 5-year-old daughter.

"Everything helps," said Amy, who declined to give her last name. "I've been out of work for four months now because I had my baby."

Santa's elves were busy at The Salvation Army's Toy Shop on Waldo Avenue. The elves were actually volunteers who helped families pick out toys and other goodies for their children.

Rena Walker is The Salvation Army's social service coordinator and, as she pointed out, chief elf. She said the Christmas program is for low-income families who need extra help during the holiday.

The agency's program has two components — Adopt-A-Family and the Toy Shop. Families are adopted by sponsors, who provided Christmas presents and dinner, through Adopt-A-Family. Families are eligible to be adopted once every three years.

The Toy Shop is for those families who do not have sponsors. The toys, books and games are new and donated by many area merchants.

Donated toys included action figures, cars, planes, trucks and more. There were lots of dolls and board games; two separate tables were filled just with these toys. One table was filled with small bags of age and gender appropriate stocking stuffers, such as small stuffed animals.

Volunteer Judy Wall has been a volunteer elf since 1993. She was helping Amy pick out toys for her four children — a 9-year-old boy, the 5-year-old girl, a 20-month-old girl and a 2-month-old girl.

"It's one of the happiest things I do for Christmas," Wall said.

Amy picked out a stuffed bear that can be doodled on, and then washed off. She chose a Terrain Twister for her son.

The younger mother said in spite of having help paying for day care, the high cost of day care — almost \$400 per week for her four children — makes it hard to work and stay ahead.

Richard and his wife, Patricia were there choosing gifts for their three children and one grandchild. Richard said he's been on disability for seven years, and his wife was recently let go from her job. This is the Midland family's second year getting help from The Salvation Army.

A cheerful man, he was amazed by all the toys as he carried their bag and a cup of hot coffee through the room.

"Thank God, for places like this," he said. "Finding help is hard to do."

The couple picked out a Superman and My Little Pony coloring books, plus a box of crayons, for two children. Jenifer Kusch has been a volunteer elf for five years now. She was walking around helping the families through the maze of tables.

"I just love seeing the pleasure the parents have selecting things for their children," she said.

As full as the room was, Wall pointed out there were fewer choices for older children and teenagers.

"There's never enough for the older children," she said.

Walker and her fellow elves will be just as busy today — the distribution was divided up alphabetically and the second half will pick up their gifts today. Grandparents will chose for their grandchildren tonight.

Advertisement





## 6-year-old's birthday gifts are treat for needy kids

Friday, December 21, 2007

By Aaron Ogg

**The Grand Rapids Press**

EAST GRAND RAPIDS -- Luke Jekkals could have been much richer in toys than he is right now.

He's not, because he asked for books for his birthday instead. What's more, he didn't keep them.

The 6-year-old donated the 25 titles he received to a Grand Valley State University book drive assisting Santa Claus Girls, the Press-sponsored charity that raises money for gifts for needy kids ages 6 months to 12 years.

About 16 of Luke's Wealthy Elementary School classmates filled the order at his recent birthday party.

Luke said he did it "because it's kids that don't have anything."

There were other considerations, too: "My dad said he'd get me a deer skin."

Kurt Jekkals, Luke's father, admits there was an incentive. He said his son is something of a "Davy Crockett fanatic," and that he and his wife, Lynn, promised him a buckskin suit and coonskin cap for making the sacrifice.

The couple read a Press story on the GVSU book drive and crafted the clever lesson/reward.

"A lot of it was just to encourage Luke to give to others," Kurt Jekkals said. "We've talked to him about the kids that are a lot less fortunate.

"And literacy is just so important for every kid."

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# The Saline Reporter

## Charity bins removed from local businesses, deemed illegal

Business owners told to change site plan, pay fee to keep them

By Sue G. Collins  
, Staff Writer

Property owners in Saline who were sponsoring charity clothing donation bins have been forced to remove the bins or pay for site plan revisions to meet city zoning codes.

Rather than pay a fee of \$350 to the city, plus the expense of having drawings completed showing the site addition, property owners chose to have the bins removed.

"I realize different communities have various regulations and we respect that, but we've never had a problem like this," said Marti Rodwell, executive director of Homeless Empowerment Relationship Organization in Ann Arbor.

The charity collects gently used clothing, shoes and linens in the bins, some of which are sold for recycling, some of which stay in the community for needy families and the work force. Funds raised support training programs and employment workshops.

"We went to the zoning board with letters of reference showing how we keep our bins tidy and agreed to limit the number of bins in the city limits. It was unfortunate, but I do understand the zoning restrictions now," Rodwell said.

Saline's zoning restrictions came as a surprise to the organization in August, when Rodwell said her staff had been told "by someone from City Hall" that they wouldn't need any further approval before delivering the bins last summer. "I wish we would have been given the right information from the city from the start," she said.

City Superintendent Gary Roubal met with City Attorney Allan Grossman to confirm the legality of the bins and told the Planning Commission that the bins were in violation of Saline's codes. Roubal's office then sent two letters to property owners explaining the situation and offering hearings. None asked for an appeal or offered site amendment drawings.

Roubal said his biggest concern is that if the city allows charity collection bins to be placed on properties without proper site plan approval, other collection stands also could easily litter public places.

Rodwell said her organization, along with property owners were "saddened" by the outcome. She received inquiries from residents who wondered what had happened to the bins and questioned their removal.

"This year, more than ever, people are desperate. They are barely hanging on to their houses and are really struggling," Rodwell said.

Residents who would like to donate winter clothing, children's boots or make a financial contribution can call 975-6849.

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## Jewish volunteers to give colleagues a break

By Valerie West  
Journal Register News Service

Many will celebrate Christmas morning tearing open boxes wrapped in festive paper and spending time with loved ones.

Volunteers who donate their time year-round also will receive a special gift from their Jewish neighbors - a day off.

Over 800 Jewish volunteers from the Jewish Community Relations Council have teamed up with the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit and Ford Motor Co. to donate their time in an event called Mitzvah Day, so regular volunteers can spend Christmas with friends and family.

"It's an opportunity to do something good with the day, rather than just have it off," said Todd Mendel, president of the Jewish Community Relations Council. "They want to do something good for their neighbors."

Mitzvah Day is the largest volunteer day for the local Jewish community, Mendel said.

This year, volunteers will help more than 50 organizations for most of the day doing charitable work such as assisting at retirement homes and delivering meals and gifts to those in need.

With the help of the Internet, more volunteers show up each year, Mendel said.

"It's been a success year in and year out," he said.

The event has had participation for at least 15 years, said event co-chairwoman Micki Grossman.

"There's the social aspect as well as doing good," Grossman said. "It's a way for people to meet other people from our own community."

Volunteers will meet at the Max M. Fisher Federation Building in Bloomfield Hills at 7:30 a.m. for an orientation session and then go in groups to their designated areas, she said.

Regent Street Assisted Living in West Bloomfield Township will be one of the organizations the volunteers will visit.

"It makes me feel so good to see other people giving to the community," said Cindy Kashdan, the activity director for Assisted Living.

This is Assisted Living's first year in the Mitzvah Day event, she said. Ten volunteers will take part in the holiday activities, visiting with residents and

helping with games, she added.

"The objective is to assist the staff and make it a brighter day for residents," Kashdan said. "It's always fun because the people who come to it, really want to be there."

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## KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

### Faith communities can help fill gaps in services to neediest Americans

Friday, December 21, 2007

BY RICHARD GLASS

We frequently read that government is not meeting the social needs of its constituents. The federal government is spending billions on a war that most Americans believe we never should have started.

State government lacks the funds to meet several needs within Michigan. Close to home, the Kalamazoo area has many needs which include food and/or heating costs for poor families, health coverage for individuals and families who may work at low-paying jobs and/or without benefits and employment for persons willing and capable but whose employers shipped jobs to other states or countries.

It is important that efforts be made to provide relief, support and hope to those who would benefit from acts of caring. While each of us who are able may want to and do help those less fortunate, oftentimes people working together can have a greater and broader impact. A group of people with varying skills can meet a greater variety of needs than can one person. While there are several organizations that are reaching out to others, I am aware of one community where members reach out both individually and collectively. Many members volunteer by helping provide food and meals so that persons and families will be fed, both in Kalamazoo County and overseas in developing countries. Some serve on agency boards and committees while others volunteer their time and energy to accomplish the agencies' missions.

The community of which I am a member is Portage United Church of Christ. While it has many individuals volunteering their time and money to meet various needs the church itself has many programs which speak to its commitment to Christian witness and service. These programs include delivering meals on wheels, providing food for a local food pantry, serving a meal at Ministry with Community and also at the church and supporting the Loaves and Fishes food program at Edison School. In addition, financial support is provided to several Kalamazoo and Portage social agencies as well as for mission trips to the Gulf coast area.

PUCC supports Foods Resource Bank, a food security program to help people in foreign countries learn to grow food for themselves and a program that brought a family to Portage from Rwanda. Support for a denominational college, seminaries and special offerings are also part of how the church strives to be vital in our community and in the world.

The season of Advent and Christmas reminds us of Christ's message of love and reaching out to others. There are many churches in Kalamazoo County for people to attend, join and become active. Many people with various beliefs and interests are matched by a variety of churches with various beliefs and understandings. If a person is interested in a church community which emphasizes love of everyone and support of those in need, supports a number of our local agencies and embraces a moderate/progressive theology, PUCC may be the type of community such a person is looking for.

Richard Glass was employed by the state of Michigan and is a resident of Portage.

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# Others' kindness makes for a better Christmas

Posted by [Jackson Citizen Patriot](#) December 21, 2007 09:32AM

JACKSON -- As I read comments online on the Dec. 10 story about Toys for Tots and Warm the Children donations being low, I am astonished people would feel it is OK to degrade those who need help.

I have received help in the past from a few places and last year from Salvation Army. This year I wanted to do it by myself, hoping I would have enough money to give my children something. I am not able to buy them anything new. However, thanks to kind people from freecycle and a few other generous souls who heard about my situation, my children will have a Christmas this year.

I have nothing brand new and still in the box for my kids, and that is OK. I have presents for them. Who says Christmas has to be about getting new presents? I have tried to teach my children this year that it is better to give. Even though we don't have much to give, we have shared what we have with the community. I spent no money, but shared what I already had.

This year I am more optimistic about the holiday than I have been in the past. I am enjoying it more because I have already met a few Santas this year, and have showed my children how to be Santas, too. My own tree would have been bare this year had it not been for those wonderful people who helped me.

I know how it feels to worry about Christmas and cried at night because there is absolutely no money. I am trying, though. Hopefully, I can reciprocate and be a Santa for someone else next year.

-- *Victoria Ebbert*





## Newsmakers: Shed contents more ordinary

By ART BUKOWSKI

abukowski@record-eagle.com

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Newsmakers 2007

This is seventh in a series of people, places and incidents that made news in northern Michigan in 2007. For all Newsmaker stories, see [Record-Eagle.com/2007newsmakers](http://Record-Eagle.com/2007newsmakers) »

BEULAH -- A room in a maintenance shed at the Benzie County government center is now stocked with power tools, paint and other ordinary things.

The same room last year housed stacks of Playboy magazines, drug paraphernalia, a tanning bed and other items linked to a couple of custodians who used the taxpayer-funded space as a personal clubhouse.

"We moved forward," said county Administrator Chuck Clarke, adding the questionable items were purged from the room months ago.

Custodian Alan Blattner still works for the county, despite pleading guilty in March to a misdemeanor embezzlement charge related to his unauthorized use of county electricity to fuel the tanning bed. Blattner, 56, co-owned the bed with another custodian and eventually took it home, Clarke said.

Criminal charges were dismissed in July against a Benzie-based state employee suspected of receiving stolen items from another custodian who frequented the room, but she hasn't returned to work.

Elaine Saffron, 49, is suspended with pay pending the outcome of an internal investigation, Michigan Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said. She wouldn't provide details and said she didn't know how long the investigation would take.

Neither Saffron nor Blattner returned calls seeking comment.

Benzie's government center houses a DHS office where Saffron worked, and officials alleged former county maintenance supervisor Donald Zaleski gave her computer equipment, office furniture and other items purchased with county credit. She also was suspected of taking a laptop computer.

Zaleski, 55, died in a car crash in December 2006, about a month after the investigation began.

Saffron initially was charged with multiple felonies by Manistee County Prosecutor Ford Stone, who took the case after Benzie Prosecutor Anthony Cicchelli declared a conflict of interest because charges also were sought against county employees. Stone later downgraded the charges to misdemeanors, and they were dismissed altogether by July.

The prosecution's case was damaged by the poor credibility of Saffron's estranged ex-husband, who initially reported the alleged wrongdoing to police, Cicchelli said. Cicchelli was back on the case once Blattner pleaded guilty. He refused to comment for this story.

Some of the items in the shed, including several marijuana pipes, were traced to the evidence room at the Benzie

County Sheriff's Department. Officials suspect custodians removed them from the trash after they were cleared from the evidence room to make space, Undersheriff Rory Heckman said.

It won't happen again, Heckman said, because drug-related items are now smashed to bits before they're discarded.

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## Photos



Drug pipes, rolling paper, a lighter and scale were among paraphernalia found in a Benzie County maintenance building. This photograph and others were taken by the Benzie County Sheriff-s Department and obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request filed by Benzie County resident Eric VanDussen. Record-Eagle file photo

MIRS

December 18, 2007

## Retiree Health Care Only 1% Covered

Less than 1 percent of the \$8.03 billion the state of Michigan is obligated to pay in future state employee and teacher retiree health care benefits is currently in the bank, signaling a "substantial bill coming due," according to a Pew Center report released today that found states, in general, face a combined \$731 billion bill in retiree benefits the states do not have the money to pay for today.

The report said that as of 2006, only \$60 million has been set aside for state and teacher retiree health benefits when \$7.97 billion more is needed. On the positive side, Pew reports that Michigan is one of only a handful of states that is even calculating the costs of the health care benefits and just one of 13 states that has set aside any assets for that pending bill as of 2006.

As for the state's pension obligations, Michigan is doing much better. While a \$63 billion bill is coming due, Michigan does have 81 percent (\$51 billion) set aside, leaving \$12 billion unfunded, which is about the national average.

Under a best-case scenario, Michigan could have the entire amount covered in 10 years, but could only have 79 percent covered under a worst-case scenario by 2017, according to the report.

While Michigan took the "unusual action" of shifting new employees to a defined contribution (401k) retirement plan 10 years ago, Michigan still has a substantial number of employees still in the old pension plan.

"The state showed a slight uptick in the funding level for its defined benefit plans in 2006, but it has fallen short of paying the annual required contribution in the last five years," the report reads.

States have promised at least \$2.73 trillion in pension, health care and other retirement benefits for public employees over the next three decades, according to a report released today by The Pew Charitable Trusts' Center on the States.

*Promises with a Price*, the first 50-state analysis of its kind, finds that states have saved enough to cover about 85 percent of their long-term pension costs, but only 3 percent of the funds needed for promised retiree health care and other non-pension benefits.

All told, states already have set aside about \$2 trillion to meet their long-term obligations. But they still need to come up with about \$731 billion—a conservative figure that does not include all costs for teachers and local government employees.

"Now we know the magnitude of this bill — and paying it will require an enormous investment of taxpayer dollars," said Susan **URAHM**, managing director of the Pew Center on the States. "For states that have dug themselves into a deep hole, there are no quick and easy solutions—but there are fiscally responsible steps all states can take. These will require time, attention and, above all, political will."

Nationally, state pension plans are in reasonably good shape. At the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2006, states had set aside over \$1.99 trillion of the \$2.35 trillion they had made in pension promises — leaving about \$361 billion unfunded.

But the good news nationally masks important variations across the states:

- Over the past decade, only a third of the states have consistently set aside the amount their own actuaries said was necessary to cover the cost of promised benefits over the long term.

- Twenty states had funding levels of less than 80 percent at the end of FY 2006—below what most experts consider healthy.

- Several states have seen particularly troubling drops in their pension funding levels. Some of the biggest drops have occurred in Hawaii, Kentucky, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Washington.

For years, states have been required to publicly report their long-term pension liabilities. Until now, they have not had to disclose the price tag of non-pension benefits, such as health care, dental and life insurance. Because of a new rule by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board, states will identify these costs in their FY 2008 financial reports, which are expected to come out between December 2008 and March 2009. The Pew Center on the States developed a first-of-its-kind preview of these numbers.

Pew found that states' long-term price tag for retiree health care and other non-pension benefits is about \$381 billion for state employees alone (excluding obligations for teachers and other local government workers). About 97 percent of that 30-year obligation was unfunded at the end of FY 2006.

Other key findings include:

- Only six states — Arizona, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Utah and Wisconsin — were on track at the end of FY 2006 to have fully funded their non-pension promises for the next 30 years.
- Half of the states account for almost 94 percent of the non-pension liabilities.
- None of the five largest states — California, Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois — had put aside money for non-pension benefits as of FY 2006.
- Per capita costs for retiree health care and other benefits range from less than \$200 in North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming to more than \$5,000 in Delaware, Hawaii and Connecticut. (Note that per capita statistics do not tell the whole story because they do not take into account state differences in wealth or ability to pay the bill.)
- Eleven states face long-term liabilities in excess of \$10 billion. These include New York at \$50 billion, California at \$48 billion, and Connecticut and New Jersey at nearly \$22 billion each.

Promises with a Price finds that while there are no quick and easy solutions, states can take steps to reduce their liabilities. For example, West Virginia reduced its long-term bill coming due for its nonpension

benefits by more than half, from an estimated \$7.8 billion to \$3.4 billion, after setting up a trust fund for payments and adopting several other reforms.

"States have the means to control their destinies. They just have to have the political will to do so," said

Katherine **BARRETT**, co-author of the report. "For a state to succeed, it must use reliable data and good

planning, carefully analyze whether proposed new benefits are affordable, and, above all, do its best to

make full payments each and every year to reduce the long-term cost."

A range of promising approaches are in play across the country. An

increasing number of states are both

setting aside money and restructuring benefits to reduce costs:

- At least five states — including Ohio, Washington and Oregon — offer hybrid pension plans that combine

elements of both defined benefit and defined contribution plans.

- Some states are raising the retirement age and closing loopholes within pension systems that allow

employees to inflate the amount they collect after retirement.

- For non-pension benefits, states are increasing premiums and co-pays and raising the number of years

of employment required for lifetime or fully subsidized benefits, among other reforms.

- At least 13 states have set up irrevocable trusts to pay for retiree health care in years to come.



## Critics unhappy with new state police headquarters

12/20/2007, 6:13 p.m. ET

By KATHY BARKS HOFFMAN  
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — The construction fencing already is up around the riverside lot in downtown where a new \$39.7 million state police headquarters will rise, but anger remains over the decision to erect the building in the midst of a sour economy and threatened cuts to state troopers.

"It's like our bridge to nowhere," Republican Sen. Cameron Brown of Sturgis said Tuesday. "People are actually offended by this project."

A new headquarters has been on the drawing board for at least five years. The State Administrative Board unanimously approved the deal in August.

The lease will cost \$3.7 million a year, though no payments will be due until the building is completed around May 2009. The state police director said the department will be able to consolidate operations from three separate locations in the new building, and Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Lansing officials say it will be a boon to downtown.

At first glance, the existing state police headquarters appears to come cheap. The state now pays Michigan State University \$1 each year to lease the East Lansing facility under a contract that runs through 2030.

But state officials who support the new building say the current headquarters is more than 70 years old, requires \$340,000 a year in maintenance and needs \$2.3 million in repairs to the roof and heating and cooling systems. Moving to the new building will allow the state police to eliminate those costs as well as some of the other leases it's now paying.

Brown, who oversaw the state police budget for eight years, said that doesn't justify spending \$3.7 million a year to lease the new building. He was one of three dissenters when the Joint Capital Outlay Subcommittee signed off on the project in March by a 14-3 vote.

The contract calls for the state to pay annual lease payments for 25 years, after which it could buy the building for \$1. That would cost the state \$92 million, but it's not likely to pay that much.

Instead, the state probably will buy the building 12 months after it opens, paying for the building with bonds that likely would have a lower interest rate than the developers could obtain.

In that scenario, the state would pay around \$45 million, including \$6 million for furniture, fixtures and equipment. The developers would get one year's worth of lease payments, but no more. The site would be exempt from property taxes once it's state-owned, dropping the state's cost even further.

Edward Woods III, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Management and Budget, said the new building is a good deal for the state because the contract requires any cost overruns to be paid by the developers, while any cost savings must be given to the state.

"The risks are with the developer. We find that to be a competitive deal," Woods said.

The deal wasn't open to bids, but he said two independent market studies showed the lease rate proposed by developers Joel Ferguson and Gary Granger reflected fair market value for a building in downtown Lansing.

The no-bid contract has raised eyebrows because Ferguson and Granger have made political donations to state officials, including contributions Ferguson gave Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

Ferguson said Wednesday that political donations didn't play a part in getting the contract, and that he has given thousands of dollars to both Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Mitt Romney in this year's presidential race.

"But this has nothing to do with that," said Ferguson, a longtime Michigan State University trustee and Democratic National Committee member. "This was the right time to build a building because you put people to work."

The five-story headquarters will house around 560 state police employees who handle administrative duties, highway safety, investigations and the Criminal Justice Information Center. Some of those employees will come from East Lansing, while others will come from the Secondary Complex.

Brown said some state police employees who contacted him wonder why the state can't find operating dollars to increase trooper strength but somehow has the money to lease a new headquarters.

Last spring, the Michigan State Police Troopers Association had to donate nearly \$400,000 to the state to keep 39 troopers who were on the verge of being laid off. Troopers also had to restrict the number of miles they drove through late July to help the department save money. In the most recent budget, forensic labs in Marquette and Sterling Heights were set to close until a recent deal was struck to keep them open.

Jack McHugh, legislative analyst for the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free-market think tank, agrees with those who think the headquarters is a bad move at this time.

"We've got a state that is in a condition of profound economic decline, state government that's broke ... and it's incurring huge new costs? The rationale just doesn't appear to hold water," he said.

Workers who move downtown will get new state-of-the-art facilities, but they'll also face increased costs, since most will have to pay for parking. Those who live outside the city of Lansing will have to pay the city's 0.5 percent nonresident income tax. City residents already pay a 1 percent income tax.

But Woods said there's also a positive side, with state economic officials estimating the headquarters will provide more than 540 jobs, including construction and spinoff jobs; generate \$2.2 million in gross state revenue; and increase personal income by \$28.5 million.

Brown also questioned whether the new headquarters is too close to the Grand River, even though it's not in the flood plain, and whether it's in a secure enough location.

Woods said the state police function that needs the most security — the state Emergency Operations Center — will be kept out of downtown. The center now is housed in a leased building just off U.S. 127 in Lansing and probably will be moved to the state Secondary Complex in nearby Eaton County where the state police training center and forensics lab are located.

The handful of lawmakers who have complained about the deal can't legally stop it, although a few have threatened to try and withhold lease payments once the building is done.

Woods said the project was thoroughly reviewed by two bipartisan oversight boards. He points out that Brown failed to persuade either to block it.

"We will tell you the timing is unfortunate," Woods said. "(But) it's really time to move on."

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On the Net:

Michigan State Police: <http://www.michigan.gov/msp>

Gov. Jennifer Granholm: <http://www.michigan.gov/gov>

Sen. Cameron Brown: <http://www.senate.michigan.gov/gop/senators/Brown.asp?District16>

Mackinac Center for Public Policy: <http://www.mackinac.org>

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